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 Arlington Street Church
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Do Small Things With Great Love

Roman Catholic nun and missionary Mother Teresa, who won the Nobel Prize for doing great things with great love, famously reminded us, “We cannot all do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

When we are overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges before us — whether earth-shaking or trivial — it’s important to remember, as 1930s Wall Street trader Henry Stanley Haskins famously reminded us, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen.”¹

We can do small things with great love.

Do you remember anthropologist Loren Eiseley’s story, *The Star Thrower*? The narrator arrives in Costabel, a coastal village in Spain. Walking the beach one pre-dawn morning, he writes, “Long-limbed starfish were strewn everywhere, sprawling where the waves had tossed them as though showered down through the night sky....”

“Ahead of me, ... a giant rainbow of incredible perfection had sprung shimmering into existence. Toward its foot, I discerned a human figure standing, as it seemed to me, within the rainbow ... gazing fixedly at something in the sand.

“He stooped and flung an object beyond the breaking surf. I labored another half a mile toward him.... In a pool of sand and silt a starfish had thrust its arms up stiffly, and was holding its body away from the stifling mud. ‘It’s still alive,’ I ventured. ‘Yes,’ he said, and with a quick yet gentle movement, he picked up the star and spun it over my head and far out into the sea. ‘It may live if the offshore pull is strong enough,’ he said.

¹ Henry Stanley Haskins, *Meditations in Wall Street* (William Morrow & Company, 1940)

“... He stooped again, and skipped another star neatly across the water. ‘The stars,’ he said, ‘throw well. One can help them.’ ... [He tossed] another star, skimming it skillfully far out over the ravening and tumultuous water.”

Later, the narrator reflects, “On a point of land, I found the star thrower.... [turning the wheel] of compassion from life to death and back to life again.

“Looking around the beach littered with bodies,
if we ask, ‘What does it matter?’,
as yet another starfish is returned to the sea,
we can answer,
‘It mattered to that one.’”²

When we’re feeling stunned by the vastness of suffering and injustice, when we just don’t know the next best thing to do, we can ask ourselves, What small gesture can I make to tip the world even a little bit to the good?

Remember the star thrower. We can do small things with great love.

You know about my year-round Secret Santa Spiritual Practice. I’m committed to doing something in secret every day — some small thing that would make someone’s life a little easier or a little sweeter. I give myself bonus points if it doesn’t involve money — it’s more challenging. Doing something for a complete stranger is the best. And my rule is that, if my anonymity is busted, it doesn’t count; I have to find something else to do. It’s wonderful, and it’s addictive — on a good day, I can get in three secret gifts!

But you know what? I can almost guarantee that most people don’t notice. They don’t even look at their parking meter to see that it hasn’t run out, after all; they just drive away. They don’t know that, moments before, the bench where they’re about to sit down was littered with the remains of a fast food picnic. And that’s fine with me; this is my spiritual practice, not theirs! If I accomplish nothing else in a day — or, worse, if I’ve made several of my own messes — I know that all is not lost. I commend you to it: Channel your inner superhero and do some small thing with great love.

Some of you remember Bob Palmer, who, with his wife, Peggy, were longtime, beloved members of this congregation until their deaths in the 1990s. Bob was my colleague — retired from a parish ministry that included serving

² from Loren Eiseley (1907-1977), “The Star Thrower,” in *The Unexpected Universe* (1969).

Nashville, Tennessee where one night, while he was out at a church meeting and his wife and daughters were at home, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in their front yard. Bob was undaunted.

After he retired and came home to Boston, if he missed that ministry, he never told me; he and Peggy loved their life here, and devoted themselves to this congregation — Peggy served on the Membership Team and Bob served as head usher. They were also very active in our Friday Night Supper Program, and Bob was committed to walking the annual Walk for Hunger.

The walk is always on a Sunday morning — the first Sunday in May. My very first year here at Arlington Street, having driven between Cambridge and Boston past a great sea of walkers, I arrived at 10:00 and there was Bob, folding orders of service. “Bob!” I said. “What are you doing here? What about the walk?” And Bob answered, “O, I already finished it. I got up nice and early so I could walk and get myself here to usher.”

Did I mention that this was in the years that the course of the Walk for Hunger was a full 25 miles? Twenty-five miles on foot before 10:00 a.m.! And did I mention that Bob was well into his 80s?

He wouldn't have even told me if I didn't ask. Bob Palmer was doing exactly what gave his life purpose and meaning: walking for hunger, welcoming people here to Arlington Street, doing small things with great love.

I love this memory. It's so uplifting and inspiring to recall times someone has done something that might have seemed small from the outside but that made a big difference to us. I'm reminded of Fred Rogers of the iconic children's television show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, and that amazing moment in 1999 at the Television Hall of Fame broadcast. Even if you have no idea who I'm talking about, I hope you'll Google this; it's one of the top ten most extraordinary moments in television history.

As Mr. Rogers receives an award, he says, in part, “Fame is a four-letter word; and like tape or zoom or face or pain or life or love, what ultimately matters is what we do with it.

“... Life isn't cheap. It's the greatest mystery of any millennium, and [we need] ...to show and tell what the good in life is all about.

“But how do we make goodness attractive?” he continues. And he answers, “By doing whatever we can do to bring courage to those whose lives move near our own — by treating our 'neighbor' at least as well as we treat ourselves, and allowing that to inform everything....

And then he asks, “Who in your life has been ... a servant to you? Who has helped you love the good that grows within you?”

In a medium that is all about image and sound and action, and that costs, in today’s dollars, well over four thousand dollars a minute,³ Mr. Rogers does something absolutely unheard of on television.

“Let's just take ten seconds, he says, “to think of some of those people who have loved us and wanted what was best for us in life — those who have encouraged us to become who we are ... — just ten seconds of silence. I'll watch the time.”

Let's do it now, shall we? It won't cost more than \$41,000; it's free! Let's take just ten seconds to reflect on those who have done small things with great love for us.

I'll watch the time.

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Mr. Rogers concludes, “No matter where they are — either here or [gone before us] — imagine how pleased those people [would] be to know that you thought of them right now....

“We have the choice of encouraging others to demean this life or to cherish it in creative, imaginative ways.” We, too, can do small things with great love.

If you Google “the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me,” for the most part, you will not find stories of people sharing their lottery winnings or donating a kidney. The vast majority of stories are of a person in the grocery line spotting someone the few dollars they were short; driving out of their way to take a stranger home; offering a kind word when things looked pretty bleak. They're about coworkers donating sick time or a classmate in a new school making room at the cafeteria lunch table. It's almost as if the big things are too big for any of us to get

³ The most recent figures I could find are from 2016: The average cost of a 30-second television ad, broadcast nationally, is about \$123,000.

our arms around — One guy said, “OMG, my mom gave birth to me. Top that!” But really, the little things count. The details matter.

As we well know, just over a week ago, a white supremacist opened fire in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, murdering 50 worshippers in cold blood.

In the midst of the sheer horror, there was tremendous heroism. It was not a small thing; it was vast and life-saving, and has the power to restore our faith in humanity. But the next day, there was a small thing.

Andrew Graystone, who runs a Christian charity in Manchester, England, explained, “There are two ways you can respond to an attack like this. You can respond with fear or you can respond with friendship.... There are little things that lots of people can do just to express friendship rather than fear.... So I just took one little action.”

Andrew Graystone stood outside the Medina Mosque, holding a sign that read, “You are my friends. I will keep watch while you pray.”⁴

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Beloved spiritual companions,

We have the choice of encouraging others
to demean this life or to cherish it.

Remember the star thrower:
It mattered to that one.

Channel your inner superhero.
We can do small things with great love.

We can respond with fear
or we can respond with love.
May we respond with love.

Amen.

⁴ Aris Folley, “Man goes viral after standing outside local mosque to ‘keep watch’ while Muslim worshippers pray,” TheHill.com, 3/16/19. Please see thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/434399-man-goes-viral-after-standing-outside-his-local-mosque-to-keep